OtherHand

A pretty stupid day hike

Let the adventure begin! On Tuesday October 27, I managed to get out of the house by 4:30 AM, more asleep than awake. After the obligatory stop in beautiful Baker for gas and what passes for fine dining at a minimart, I made it to the head of Anvil Canyon about 10 AM. A couple of things struck me about the trip in.

First, I was surprised at how long it took to get from the pavement of Badwater Road into Butte Valley. It was about 1-1/2 stinkin' hours with no stopping or sightseeing! Second, I was also impressed by how bad the road becomes at places after passing Warm Spring. These sort of observations were precisely the reason I wanted to do this first trip alone. I wanted to look at this all as someone who has never seen it before, as the Germans had, and note what feelings/impressions I got. And the underlying impression was that this was one very remote place, and I hadn't even left the truck yet.

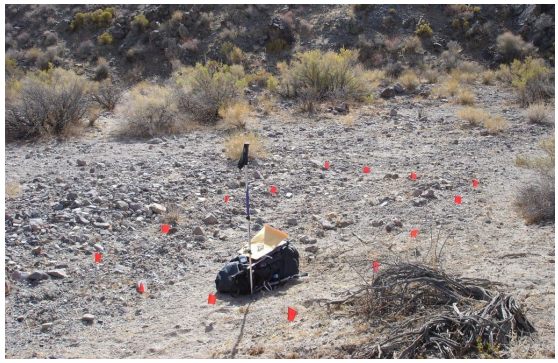
Anvil Canyon trailhead (T. Mahood)

I started off from the truck and down Anvil Canyon about 10 AM. It was very windy and pretty cool, maybe 60 degrees. As I left the trail head at Willow Spring I noted there is no obvious way to know if there's really water present unless you go down and rummage through the brush. To a casual observer it just looks like dense brush.

Burro tracks or a runner? (T. Mahood)

On the way to the van's location, another observation….I was really amazed at how much burro tracks look like human sneaker footprints. I could see how someone not knowing what they were could mistake them for fresh human tracks and maybe follow them. It appeared as if there was a deranged running club going up and down Anvil Canyon. Oh yeah…And I was struck by how sandy and loose the material was that comprised the "road" in the wash. Very easy to get a vehicle stuck.

With the GPS coordinates, I made it to the van's location easily. There was a rock cairn present on the large rock near where the left front of the vehicle came to rest. I marked off the approximate outline of the van with flags and took photos to match those in the DVNP Investigators Report. It was pretty obvious how they took a right fork when the road, such as it was, actually veered left and ended up in a no man's land. As I climbed up on the bank of the wash to the south to take overall pictures, it suddenly struck me that Egbert probably did the same thing and was at the same spot on the bank, to get an overview of where they were. It was a very eerie feeling.



Van location (T. Mahood)

I continued on to the bottle site (which I started calling the “bottle bush”), coming across some old bones. They looked a bit large to be human, and I’d guess burro. I took pictures and coordinates (the bones were later determined to be burro). Finding the bottle bush was a little tricky. The coordinates I had from Debbie were rounded a bit, but close. I had printed out the two poor B&W prints I had of the location and was able to line up the background hills for a good match. There was only about a 100 foot area along the wash where the topography lined up. If I had better prints, it would have been easy to find the absolutely precise spot, but I was close enough.

I did find what I thought to be the bottle bush, although the ground in front of it looked like it had been eroded a bit by flooding in the intervening years. I sat there a while and thought about where I was, what I was seeing, and took some panoramas of the view. The seating location obviously suggests shading from very late afternoon sun. Early in the day it would have been in direct sun, so I think that puts a general time of day on when it was used.

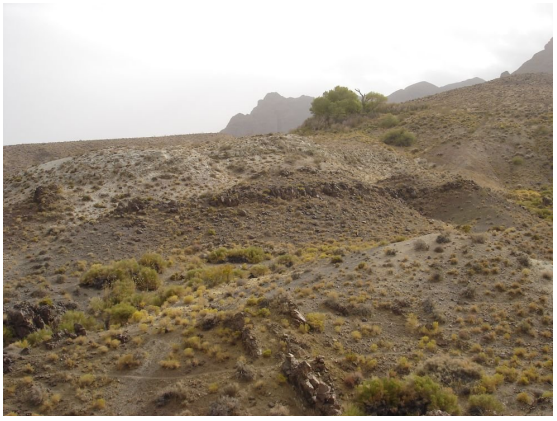
The Bottle Bush (T. Mahood)

At this point the wind had picked up much more and the weather was getting colder and weirder. The main valley was dusty enough that I could not see past the mouth of Anvil Canyon in the distance or to the other side of the main valley. There was a real milky looking overcast that left me with an ominous feeling. Looking at the time, I was thinking I wouldn't be able to make it southerly past Squaw Spring, as I would have liked, and still make it back to my truck by 5. I had already decided I didn't want to be out hiking in Anvil Canyon after dark, as there wouldn't be much of a moon with the overcast. Also, being there solo, the history of the place and the weather was all making things more than a bit creepy for me. I decided I had time to poke a bit more down Anvil Canyon, then up to Squaw Spring. My maps showed an old road that ran from Anvil Canyon southwest up to Squaw Spring.

As I traveled easterly down Anvil Canyon, I was looking for anything that might have enticed the Germans to head south. For most of the route that way was blocked by mountains, but near the bottle bush the topography to the south opened up, and I knew that Squaw Spring was up there somewhere. Having seen the burro tracks, I was assembling a marvelous scenario in my mind where the Germans had also seen them and been led astray.

My brilliant theory was that when they got to the bend in the road shown on my map that turns back to the right and heads southwesterly up to Squaw Spring, they may have seen burro tracks heading up the road to the spring and thinking they were human, followed them to the south. Of course I knew that CLMRG had returned to the area on a later search and thoroughly explored the Squaw Spring area without luck. But I put that thought aside and was quite proud of my idea.

Sadly, that idea was dashed when I reached the road bend. I use the term "road" in the loosest sense. The road up to the right was so faded it was almost invisible (I had it shown on my GPS map which saved me) and it was so rocky it couldn't possibly have shown burro tracks. Nevertheless, I started up the road, climbing the alluvial fan toward Squaw Spring. Looking south, at this point I couldn't think of any conceivable reason they would have been drawn in that direction. While the terrain to the south looked milder, there was no obvious attraction to proceed that way. As I reached the ridge opposite Squaw Spring, a incongruous clump of green on the hillside, it was almost 3 PM and time to get the hell outta Dodge, so I really didn't get to poke in the shrubs at all. But as with Willow Spring, this was a case of not seeing obvious water.



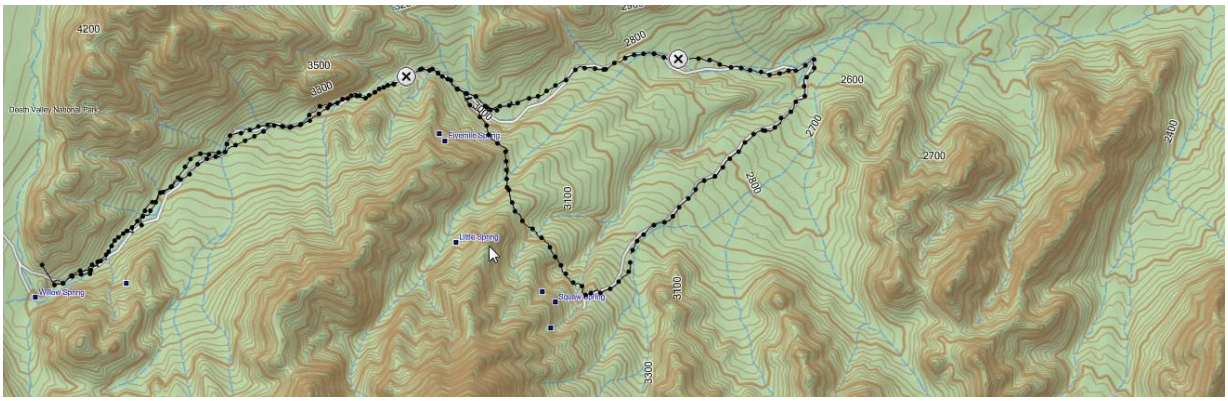
Squaw Spring at the bunch of trees (T.

Now the "road" to Squaw Spring makes almost a 180 bend, so you end up going east down Anvil Canyon a ways, then backtrack up to Squaw Spring. To save distance and get out of this crazy place as quickly as possible, I decided to save time and just head cross country almost straight back to the van, cutting off maybe 1-1/2 miles, and lots of walking in sand. It was an adventure, going up and down through

Mahood)

ravines, and I saw some interesting stuff I wouldn't have otherwise seen. I came across a nice 50 caliber shell casing from 1943, a sure sign that I'm in an out of the way place. I've found a great many of those out in the desert.

By now the wind was howling (not quite yet bad enough for goggles) and the temperature had dropped to the mid-50s. I got back to the truck about 4:40 PM, after covering a total of just over 12 miles for the day. As there was still light for about another hour, I decided I'd just try for home rather than spend a night with the truck rocking in the wind (not to mention being a little relieved to return to civilization and away from this God-awful place). I managed to get home just after 10 PM, more than a little tired. 10 hours driving and almost 7 hours hiking. Sadly, I have done stupider things and I would yet do worse!



Anvil Canyon hike GPS track, the first X is the van and second X is the Bottle Bush (T. Mahood)

So having seen the spots and soaking up the ambiance, I began dwelling on the problem, trying to come up with a scenario that reasonably fit what was known about the case and as a bonus, might just make some sense. On October 29th, only two days after my hike, I was at home looking at an overall map of Death Valley. Like viewing one of those optical illusions where an image suddenly pops out, everything just fell into place and became visible. I suddenly saw a way the Germans could have ended up in Anvil Canyon through a series of reasonable, honest mistakes, and why they might have set out for the south. I was also acutely aware that I might have done exactly the same thing were I in their situation. Is this, in fact, what happened? No one can know for sure. But it offered an explanation for their apparent actions and fits the known facts of the incident very well. The next

section is a slightly edited down version of an email I sent out to several interested parties on October 29th.

Next installment....

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